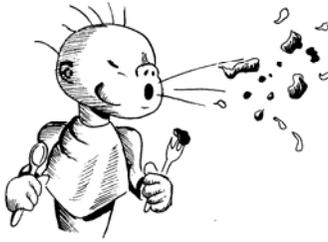


INTRODUCING SOLID FOODS TO INFANTS



Many new parents wonder when the time is right to start introducing solid foods to their infants. Sometimes, it's hard to tell when infants are ready, and many parents wonder if starting too early or too late can be harmful.

Recent research indicates that instead of using children's ages as a guide by which to introduce solid foods, parents, in collaboration with their children's health care provider, should consider developmental factors, to help them decide when the time is right.

It is important that parents pick the right time to introduce solid foods - neither too early nor too late. Many experts believe that introducing solid foods too early may interfere with future eating habits. Infants who are not ready for solid foods may reject

them. This could then create a lot of tension for both parents and children at mealtimes. On the other hand, waiting too long to introduce solid foods (some experts say that 'too long' is late into the second half of the first year) can also lead to problems. Older babies may not seem interested in learning how to chew and swallow solids if they become too accustomed to nursing. Older children may also be less willing to try the new tastes and textures that accompany the introduction of solid foods.

How to Tell if Children are Ready for Solid Foods

Most infants become ready to try solid foods when they are between four and six months of age. When parents think their children are ready, they should consult with their children's health care provider before beginning. Here are some signs that often indicate that infants are ready to try solid foods:

***Babies should have good head control.** They should be able to hold their heads up well before strained foods are even offered.

***The tongue thrust reflex should be gone before introducing solids.** The tongue thrust reflex causes young

infants to push foreign matter out of their mouths. This reflex protects young infants from choking on foreign bodies. If children push even tiny bits of food (rice cereal, for example) right back out after numerous attempts, the tongue thrust reflex is probably still present, and they are not ready for solids.

***Children reach for and show interest in table foods.** If children try to grab food out of their parents' hands, or if they watch other people eat with great interest, they may be ready to give solid foods a try.

***Children are able to move their tongues back and forth as well as up and down.** Parents can discover this by watching their children.

***Babies can draw up their lower lips so that they can take food from a spoon.**

When Babies are Ready...

Once parents and their children's health care provider have determined that it is a good time to try solid foods, parents should begin slowly. During the first few months, the amount of solid food children eat is not of great importance, as long as breast or bottle feeding is continued. Really, in the beginning, children are

gaining experience with the how to's of eating and with different textures and flavors rather than eating for nutrition. Here are some tips to help make parents' and their children's early eating sessions as stress-free as possible:

***Choose the right time.** Breastfeeding mothers might find it best to introduce feedings when their milk supply is lowest. This is usually in the late afternoon or early evening. If children usually wake up hungry during the night, an evening feeding is a good choice. If their children are the hungriest in the morning, parents might offer solids in the morning. Parents should be flexible. If parents choose a time that they think is appropriate but their children seem cranky or tired, parents should postpone the feeding for a time when their children are alert and happy.

***Don't feed solids when children are full.** It is a good idea for parents to offer their babies a small amount of formula or breast milk before feeding solid foods, so they aren't ravenous. However, parents should be careful not to feed their children too much formula, or they might not be especially interested in the solids.

***Be prepared to devote a lot of time to feeding.** Feeding solids is a

time consuming process. Parents should be patient and willing to spend as much time as it takes.

***Have the necessary supplies ready.** Parents should make sure that they have the necessary supplies before introducing solids. If their children will be eating from a high chair or feeding seat, parents should give their babies time to become comfortable in it. Parents should make sure that any restraining straps are always used. Also, parents should use blankets or towels as padding if the seat is too large. Remember, if children can't sit up at all in a high chair or feeding seat, it's probably a good idea to put off feeding solids for a while.

The right feeding spoon is an important piece of equipment. It should be small, and possibly have a plastic coating, which is easier on a baby's gums than metal.

Parents should make sure their children wear bibs, too. This will prevent stains and messes on clothing.

***Start with small servings.** Parents should consider their children's first few meals practice sessions. They should start with very small amounts of food, and they should make sure

each bite they offer their children is very small, too.

***Know when the meal is over.** Parents should always end the meal whenever their children lose interest. Fussiness, turning the head away, and clamping the mouth shut are possible signs that babies have had enough.

Good Foods to Start With

There is not total agreement about what foods are best to begin with. Parents should check with their children's health care provider, and if he or she has no specific recommendations, parents can try one of the foods listed below. At first, the foods served need to have a very fine or smooth texture. As children grow more accustomed to solid foods, more and more texture can be introduced.

Parents should keep in mind that they probably won't be able to tell whether or not their children like a particular food by the looks on their faces. Most babies will make funny faces no matter how much they like what they are being offered, especially if the taste is tart. Parents should take note of whether or not their babies open up their mouths for a refill to determine what foods they like the best.

***Rice Cereal.** Iron enriched baby rice cereal is the first choice of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and it is probably the most commonly recommended first food. It can be mixed with breast milk, formula, or water.

***Plain Unsweetened Whole Milk Yogurt.** Some experts say that babies will most easily accept something familiar - a food that is close to milk in consistency and/or taste, like yogurt. Most babies like yogurt, and many will develop a taste for tart and unsweetened foods. Babies who are allergic to or intolerant of milk products should begin with something else.

***Apple sauce or strained bananas.** Most babies like these foods, but if they start out on such sweet foods, they will tend to refuse less sweet foods when they are offered later.

***Vegetables.** While vegetables are nutritious and not sweet, many have strong, distinctive flavors, and babies often don't like them as much as cereal or yogurt.



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